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PREFACE

From the hoary past, India has been preserving an unbroken tradition of spiritualism through *Sanatana Dharma*. But the ordinary Hindu, more than others, is innocently ignorant of his religion. Here is an attempt to present the religious fundamentals of Hinduism in a capsular form to the general public, who want to enquire, learn and understand.

Our religion is most ancient and most modern – ancient in that it has its roots hidden in antiquity and modern because it speaks about truths which are as valid today as they were in ancient times. Its behests, when intelligently understood and faithfully followed, will go a long way in making life more rich and meaningful, more sweet and rewarding.

Care has been taken to see that the presentation is concise but comprehensive, though at times, for brevity's sake, some relevant but unimportant facts had to be sacrificed.

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Swami Gurudasananda.

1 Sanatana Dharma

Hinduism is the mother of all religions. But it is a misnomer to call our religion as Hinduism. Hindu is a distortion of the word 'Sindhu' by which the river Indus was known to the ancient Persians and the religion of the people who lived on the banks of the Sindhu was, therefore, called Hinduism. The more appropriate name is Sanatana Dharma, *philosophia perennis*, the Eternal Religion or the Ancient Law. As the Vedas are the sources of our Sanatana Dharma, it is also called the *Vaideekamata*, the Vedic Religion.

Hindu philosophy is not philosophy as the English educated ordinarily understand, but rather the enunciation of the principles and detailed description of a practical scheme of total transformation of human consciousness in all its aspects. The Hindu takes religion not as a week-end activity or a holiday distraction but as something that affects the whole of life and its impact on the human personality. Religion for him is not a set of dogmas, doctrines and ceremonies but life and experience. Hinduism actually represents a commonwealth of religions, leading the human being step by step until he realizes his divine nature.

2 The Greatness and Glory of Hinduism

India has been the cradle of all great philosophical systems that the world has seen. All those who have read World History even casually will agree that the European world owes its culture and civilization to Greece, which itself was very much influenced by the Hindu thought. Willam Johens writes: "When we compare the writings of the Greeks with the great, clear, comprehensive systems of the philosophy of the Hindus of India, we cannot help thinking that the Greeks derived their knowledge from the fountain head of Indian philosophy".

Writing about the greatness of the Hindu philosophy, Victor Cousin, the French historian, remarks: "There can be no denying that the Hindus possessed the knowledge of the true God. Their philosophy, their thought is so sublime, so elevating, so accurate and true, that any comparison with the writings of the Europeans appears like a Promethean fire stolen from Heaven as in the presence of the full glow of the noon-day sun". He continues: "... When we read with attention the poetical and philosophical monuments of the East, above all, those of India, which are beginning to spread in Europe, we discover there many a truth and truths so profound, and which make such a contrast with the meanness of the result at which the European genius has sometimes stopped, that we are constrained to bend the knee before the Philosophy of the East, and to see in this cradle of the human race the native land of the highest philosophy".

While paying a tribute to India in his famous book "The World Is Will And Idea" Schopenhauer says: "In the whole world there is no religion or philosophy so sublime and so elevating as the Vedanta (the philosophical system of the Upanishads). This Vedanta has been the solace of my life and it will be the solace of my death".

Here is an excerpt from Schlegel's Work on Indian Language, Literature and Philosophy: "It cannot be denied that the early Indians possessed a knowledge of the true God and their writings are replete with sentiments and expressions, noble, clear and severely grand, as deeply conceived and reverentially expressed as in any human language in which men have spoken of God". He affirms that in comparison with the Hindu thought, the highest stretches of the European philosophy appear like dwarfish pigmies in the presence of grand, majestic Titans.

Ours is the oldest and the grandest of all living religions and no other religion has produced so many great thinkers, great saints, great teachers, great kings and epic writers. No religion in the world preaches the dignity of humanity in such a lofty strain as Hinduism. There is every justification for the Hindus' feeling of dignified pride and joy for being fortunate enough to be born in this sacred land of Bharath – the *punyabhoomi* of the noble race.

3 Growth of Hindu Philosophical Thought

The ancient citizens of Aryavarta were fortunate ones. Nature's generous bounties kept them beyond all physical wants. The Indo-Gangetic plain was fertile and yielded rich returns without much labour. This gave them ample time, energy and leisure to enquire into and think about deeper truths and devote themselves to creative arts. They looked at the deep blue star studded sky above and the mysterious world around them with eyes full of curiosity and searching analysis. They listened to the soft patter of rains, heard the varied strains of the sweetest music in the quiet rippling of the brooks, the thundering solitudes of the waterfalls and the silent scampering of the woodland creatures. Fond of variety and adventure, they roamed about everywhere with a joyous abandon in what seemed to be a perfect paradise to them. Many were the days of exquisite delight they spent in those regions of matchless beauty, hearing the carefree twitter of the birds and enjoying the scenic splendours of the wonderful land they came to live in. The world seemed to dance before them with all its luring charms. They fell into spells of ecstasy and poured out their divine joy in songs and sonatas. Being keen observers of nature and scientific thinkers of a lofty mould, they failed not to see the other side of life also. Those pleasant joys could not hide from their penetrating vision the bitter ills of life. The ravishing riot of colours and the luxurious spread of the fairest flowers in the morning had changed before long into a crumpled carpet of pale and pitiful waste. Change, they observed, was the keynote of life. All beings and things, days and seasons were in a state of constant flux. Where there was a bloom, there ought to be a fade. Everything was caught in the vortex of change – growth, degeneration and decay. This, they noticed, was as true in their inner world as it was outside. Thoughts and sentiments, ideas and intellectual evaluations were no exceptions to the rule. They also noticed that grief followed close upon joy and pain always in attendance with pleasure.

The first seeds of enquiry were thus sown in their minds. "Behind this vast arena of change, is there an unchanging essence, an Immutable Reality?" It also struck them that every enjoyment came to man wearing always a cap of sorrow on its head. Every earthly delight had its inevitable penalty, every happiness its share of anxiety and fear. In wealth there was the fear of poverty, in health that of disease and in enjoyment that of suffering.

Life in this world, ruled by time and change, was handicapped in a hundred ways – physically, mentally and socially. At every stage of progress, they got clogged with limitations and finitude. Happiness was fleeting and temporary, unreal and illusive in nature. Once caught, every pleasure began to pall. All was not really as it appeared. Things were not what they seemed.

The stillness of icy death frightened them. The powerful arms of death held everybody in their embrace. The rich and the poor, the saints and the sinners – all died. The problem of death demanded their immediate attention, as it was a problem that could not be postponed too long, for it had to be solved in life. "Can death be conquered? In death, is there an end of everything or is there something that survives the dissolution of the body?"

“What is the basis of this world? What is the Reality underlying man? Are both these the same?”

Rare scholars mused in corners over these questions, which agitated their minds for centuries and centuries. Elaborate discussions, seminars and conferences over these problems were held in various parts of the country in the royal courts, in the forest retreats of saintly souls, in the recesses of the caves, around the sacrificial fire of the householders and in rural scenes of calm beauty.

Some tried to unravel the mysteries of life, first by an analysis of external nature. This incidentally met with failure as the problem of Ultimate Reality could not be solved by examination of things, which were impermanent, constantly changing and conditioned by limitations of space and time. Some others tried to get a clue by delving into the depths of their very being, having been encouraged by the significant observation that knowledge of the nature of gold gives one the knowledge of the nature of everything made of gold. They thus concluded that if there was an Ultimate Reality underlying all existence, the best place and the easiest way to find it was in oneself.

These mighty heroes of spirituality whom we call as ‘Rishis’ (rishi means seer of Divine Light) perfected themselves in the practice of every virtue and gained immense powers by exclusive devotion to the object of their quest. They spurned temporal values and stuck to the higher glories of the soul. Driven by an irresistible urge to discover the Truth, many of them retired to the forests to lead a life of undisturbed contemplative meditation and severe penance in solitude. In their lifelong dedication to the discovery of Truth, by resorting to their forest abodes, removed far away from the haunts of worldly people, great and manifold were the hardships and privations they had to endure.

They vowed themselves to a life of strict celibacy and voluntary poverty and braved dangers from wild animals and inclement weather. Satisfied with what little they got by chance for food and shelter, but ever feeling content and inwardly poised, they lived an austere life in their forest huts, till their hearts were illumined by the Divine Light. No wonder the patient research of these great pathfinders of humanity was rewarded with ultimate victory and the truths relating to the Self, the world, the ‘Beyond’ and the Supreme Reality were laid bare before them, bringing in their train bliss and immortality to humanity.

4 The Founders of Hinduism

All the religions of the world sprang from and centered on a personality. Christianity is built up around the life and teachings of Jesus, Confucianism around the name of Confucius, Islam around the name of Mohammad and Buddhism around the name of the Buddha. But Hinduism is a unique religion in that it does not owe its existence to any single individual or prophet; it is not based on dogmas either.

Hinduism is based not on speculative thought but on the personal experiences and the authentic revelations of the great seers and contemplative maharishis of ancient India, which have been verified and are verifiable even today. The edifice of our religion is built on the strong foundation of ‘*Sruti*’ with ‘*Smriti*’ as the walls of its structure. The other scriptures are *puranas*, *itihasas* and *agamas*.

Sruti is what is heard and Smriti is what is remembered. Sruti is *pratyaksha* (intuition) and Smriti is *anumana* (inference and interpretation). While intuition abides interpretation can change. They are revelations which came to the sages during long spells of silent intuitive

insight and not laboured productions of an imaginative mind. Spiritual insight is very different from religious intellection. Those rishis were *mantra drastas* who had intuited the Absolute as the boundless spirit that pervades the whole universe and floods the soul of all beings.

The Awakened Ones thrust on themselves, with a missionary zeal, the sacred responsibility of announcing to the unenlightened multitudes the way to everlasting felicity. Having themselves crossed the vast ocean of transmigratory existence, in their universal love and sympathy, they took upon themselves the onerous task of ferrying others also to the distant shore of Everlasting Bliss and Perfect Tranquility. They were Master Souls whose attainments in the realms of the spirit sound almost mythical to us moderns. They were models of virtue and patterns of perfection, lifted high above all terrestrial joys and sorrows, which keep the soul in bondage and consequent misery. Every Hindu is proud to trace his lineage from one or other of these great rishis of creative genius, who were the champions of our religion and who had realized God both as immanent and transcendental to themselves.

5 Basis of Sanatana Dharma

The discoveries and conclusions made by the great rishis (Vedic seers) on the basis of logical reasoning and personal experience (*swanubhava*) are treasured up in the Vedas, the sacred scriptures of Hinduism. Their spiritual intuitions spreading over a long expanse of time are transcribed in the Sruti (that which has been heard) which consists of the four Vedas – Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva – the crest jewels of Indian transcendental wisdom. The Vedas were an unwritten literature till comparatively recent times, when they were reduced to writing by the sage Krishna Dvaipayana, also known as Vyasa. But Vyasa was only a compiler and not the author. He flourished at the time of the Mahabharata war. The teacher sang the Vedas to his pupils and the pupils learnt them by rote. Even now the Sruti is learnt in the same way.

Hindus consider that the Vedas are *nitya* (eternal) in the sense that they deal with the Timeless Truth and that their texts never undergo any modification and hence are eternal. They are self existence and are revealed at the beginning of each cycle. They are *apaurusheya* – not ascribable to human authorship. Being nonhuman compositions, they are free from the flaws, native to the defective human intellect. The Vedas have supreme validity. Smritis have a lesser authority and the puranas and the itihisas come only next.

6 Vedas and their divisions

In the Vedas – the *moolagranthas* (Basic Scriptures) of our religion – we find frequent references to the positions of stars and constellations in those days. The markings of the position of Orion and other constellations in those times are furnished. On the basis of these astronomical data, the Vedas, at least some of them, seem to have been written some 4000 years before Christ.

The Vedas are roughly divided into two sections – the Karma Kanda which deals with rituals and yajnas and the Jnana Kanda which expounds philosophical wisdom. The purpose of the former is the attainment of *preyas* (material well being, here and hereafter) and that of the latter is *sreyas* (attainment of the highest spiritual good).

The orthodox scholars classify the Vedas into four sections: (1) *Samhitas* containing hymns in metrical tunes as prayers, (2) *Brahmanas* containing prose compositions with directions about the rituals and Vedic sacrifices, (3) *Aranyakas* dealing mainly with the symbolic representation of the yajnas and studied in the forest abodes and (4) The *Upanishads* which form the concluding chapters of the Vedas (hence the name Vedanta) consisting of philosophical reflections – the soul is one with Brahman etc.

7 The Upanishads

The central theme of the Upanishad is the search for what is True. Out of the 120 Upanishads that remain today, 11 are famous that are called major Upanishads. They are Isa, Kena, Katha, Prasna, Mundaka, Mandukya, Aitareya, Taittiriya, Chandogya, Brahadaranyaka and Svetasvatara.

The Upanishads are written in a conversational style as between a teacher and a disciple or as between a father and a son. The Upanishads form the basis of all schools of Vedanta, though Vyasa, Gaudapada, Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva and others developed it into a full fledged philosophy later on. *Veda* comes from the root Vid – to know. Veda means knowledge and so Vedanta stands for the Absolute Knowledge (literally the end of Knowledge) or Eternal Wisdom which is the foundation and the end of all phenomenal existence. Vedanta is a systematic philosophy – the Science of the Soul – and aims at the determination of the Ultimate Reality with as much reason as can possibly be brought to the understanding of the problem of Transcendental Truth. It is the unshakable foundation of the spiritual culture of India. As Swami Vivekananda points out, if there is one system of philosophy which has stood the test of time and remained unshaken by the progress of science, it is the Science of Vedanta. The word ‘upanishad’ stands for wisdom which when learned from (upa) a teacher completely (ni) loosens and destroys (shad) the student’s attachment to the world, thus enabling him to attain Bliss and Freedom. The Upanishadic doctrines are pitched too high for the common mind. They can be taught only by a competent teacher and can be understood only by a brilliant student. So, not everybody is qualified for the upanishadic wisdom. Only those who have *viveka* (discrimination), *vairagya* (dispassion), *mumukshutva* (yearning for liberation) and the six treasures of *sama* (calmness of mind), *dama* (self control), *upariti* (self settledness), *titiksha* (forbearance), *samadhana* (complete concentration) and *sraddha* (faith in Guru and in the Scriptures) are fit for it. Veda is the only scripture which requires its votary to go beyond it too.

Sage Vyasa composed a treatise Brahma Sutra – cryptic aphorisms (555 in number), in which he synthesized the meaning of the upanishadic passages and reconciled the apparent contradictions with convincing arguments. The Upanishads, Brahma Sutra and the Bhagavad Gita are revered as Prasthanatraya (the triple canon of the Vedanta philosophy).

8 The Three Schools of Vedanta Philosophy

The Vedanta texts have been commented upon by the three Acharyas as well as others thus giving birth to two distinct subsystems of philosophy, viz. (1) The Non-dualism of Sankara and (2) The Theism of Ramanuja and Madhva. Sankara reiterates that Brahman (Brahman comes from the word ‘Brihm’ – to grow). Brahman is the One Supreme Reality to whose expansion there is no limit. It is the Absolute, the substratum and ground of all names and forms, the All-pervading Pure Consciousness – that from which everything evolves, by which everything is sustained and into which everything returns is the only reality, the world is

unreal (but not non-existent) and an appearance and the individual soul is, in essence, identical with Brahman. Life is a sublime manifestation of the One Reality and is full of Bliss and Beauty. The nature of liberation is a state of oneness with Brahman and this can be attained only by jnana through *sarva karma sanyasa*. According to Ramanuja who propounds the Visishtadvaita system, or Qualified Non-dualism, Brahman with attributes – Narayana – is the Infinite auspicious God, but the jivas and the universe being parts of Brahman are also real. As an analogy, if the pomegranate fruit is taken as Brahman, the seeds are the jivas and the rind is the universe. Brahman and Jiva are inseparable but are non identical. *Bhakti* (devotion) and *prapatti* (total surrender) to the Lord are the means to God realization. In Madhva's dualism, the living souls and the universe are eternally separate from God, though the former is totally dependent on Him for existence; *Mukti* is not oneness with God, but nearness to Him and the means to it is by *seva* (service) and surrender.

Next to the Vedas comes a class of religious books of secondary authority called the Smritis. They are founded on Sruti and out of the fourteen that remain today, four are important. They are:

1. Manu Smriti or Manava Dharma Shastra
2. Yajnavalkya Smriti
3. Shankha and Likhita Smriti and
4. Parashara Smriti

All of them deal with the rules and regulations for the conduct of the individual, family, social and national life.

Next come the moral codes known as Dharma Sastras such as Apasthamba Dharma Sutra and Gauthama Dharama Sutra (Dharma means the Scheme of Right Living) which explain the religious duties and civil law. They form the basis for the Hindu Law even today.

Besides the Smritis, we have the eighteen puranas composed by Vyasa. The great saint, like all other founders of philosophy strove for a socio-spiritual transformation of the country by presenting truth dressed up in fancy, myths and stories to suit the weak understanding of the common people. They all stress the importance of observance of a moral and mental discipline to root out the ego, eloquently praise the joy of right living, right thinking, devotion to God and the Lord's concern for the welfare of His devotees. Among the puranas, the Bhagavata and the Vishnu Purana command the highest respect. Bhagavata is a treasure house of philosophical wisdom and intense devotion.

Then in order of importance come the *itihasas* (epics, – Ramayana and the Mahabharata). Sage Valmiki sang the immortal story of Rama in the Ramayana which is also called the *Adikavya*, as it was the first book of Sanskrit poetry (after the Vedas). In the Ramayana, Valmiki depicts Sri Ramachandra, son of Dasaratha, as an Ideal Man, the model king, and an example of a perfect human life wedded to Truth and Righteousness. The portrayal of every character in the Ramayana is superb. Rama and Lakshmana stand as ideal brothers, Bharata towers over others in devotion, Satrugna is the very embodiment of self effacement. Hanuman is the ideal dasa, a model of perfect Brahmacharya, Sita, the Immaculate and Pure wife and Vibheeshana, the personification of *Sarnagati Tattva* (surrender to the Divine).

Vyasa's Mahabharata is called the fifth Veda, as it contains more than a hundred thousand verses and almost all our moral tales teaching that Truth alone triumphs and not untruth. All those in misery and distress will get solace and comfort by a careful study of it.

All the ethical wisdom necessary for attaining perfection can be found in Santi Parva and Anusasana Parva. In an attempt to boost up the morale of the Pandavas, the stories of Nala, Harischandra, Savitri and others are told by the rishis in the forest in Vana Parva.

Mahabharata has moulded the character and civilization of Hindus from times immemorial. It preaches the Gospel of Dharma and the well known but unlearned lesson that love begets love, that hatred engenders hatred, that anger, pride and covetousness lead to disaster and ruin. This is the greatest book of the world wherein the concept of Dharma and its various ramifications are explained in a masterly way in the context of a fratricidal war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Sri Krishna stands as the central figure goading Arjuna, the representative of man, lost in ignorance and attachment, to rightful action and final victory. The most important portions of this epic are the Bhagavad Gita, the Vishnu Sahasranama given by Bheeshma to Yudhisthira, Vidura Niti, Sanatsujateeya, and Yaksha Prasna.

The two epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, serve as a foundation of the spiritual culture of India and have taught us the real spirit of true religion. They have been the centers from which the motive forces of National Integration have sprung. Everyone who calls himself a Hindu must study at least these two epics.

In addition to the *Itihasas*, we have *Agama's* such as "*Pancharatra*" provide specifications for temple construction, details for making icons & their installation and instructions for worship (Puja).

To sum up, the Hindu scriptures consist of the Vedas, Smritis, Puranas, Itihasas and Agamas.

9 The Bhagavad Gita

The modern man, struggling to keep the body and soul in tact, has neither time nor the energy to read all this extensive literature in his life time. From the sadhana point of view, it is enough if he reads regularly the Bhagavad Gita which is the cream of all the Vedas and essence of all the Upanishads. In the words of Dr. S Radhakrishnan, 'Bhagavad Gita is an epitome of the essentials of all Vedic teaching'. A knowledge of its teachings leads to the realization of all human aspirations. Through the Gita, reality can be touched more deeply. As and when dejection, despair and dark periods of disillusionment and doubt stare us in our face, there can be no better companion and guide for us than then the Bhagavad Gita; when we open the Gita, we will find a verse here and a verse there which will at once elevate us above the overwhelming tragedies and make us smile.

The Gita teaches that all our actions and thoughts should have as their mainsprings as inspiration love and devotion. It insists on the control and purification of the mind, single-hearted devotion and righteous action with no sense of egoity. Unlike the upanishadic messages which can be grasped only by a brilliant pupil, the teachings of the Gita are modulated to suit the capacity of all. Gita exhorts us to control our instinctive impulses and rise above all that which binds us. All our actions have their roots in thoughts. Each individual is born with an inherent nature (*svabhava*) and his evolutionary development (*svadharma*) can be only along the path chalked out by his particular inner traits and never along that of an alien nature. This naturally gives a wide scope for the individual to choose his particular path from a diverse range and to progress from wherever he stands at the moment. In its wide-encompassing love and sympathy for humanity, Gita asserts that even the sinner in the lowest steps of degradation need not despair. The path is not closed even for him and once he makes an earnest resolve to walk the righteous path, he should be considered as holy and this holiness shall soon re-fashion his life. He soon becomes a dharmatma and attains to everlasting peace. These are the remarkably vibrant words of Sri Krishna ever ringing in our ears. No amount of sin is a bar to salvation. So long as man's desire for sense pleasures remains unsubdued, the soul is visited time and again by births and deaths. Cessation from action is neither desirable nor practical in life. Freedom *from* action can exist

only in fancy, not in fact. We should not relinquish our duty but perform it without attachment and / or aversion but with dexterity, striving to attain freedom *in* action. Karma done in a spirit of self-sacrifice and self-dedication prepares for wisdom by purifying the heart. Work done in such a spirit is *Yajna*. Sacrifice is self-giving, an expansion into the Cosmic Consciousness of which we are just a limitation. Any activity performed as a yajna can no more be a source of bondage. As in a garland the beads are connected by the thread, which runs through them, behind all the variations of names and forms, there is the one ontological Reality which is our essential nature.

Sri Krishna asserts that He is the fragrance in flowers, brightness in light, heat in the sun, sapidity in water, the origin, support and the end of everything. He is the cosmos revealed and the germ that lies hidden.

How much He prizes love can be seen from Sri Krishna's declaration:

पत्रं पुष्पं फलं तोयं यो मे भक्त्या प्रयच्छति ।

तदहं भक्त्युपहृतमश्नामि प्रयतात्मनः ॥२६॥

patraṁ puṣpaṁ phalaṁ toyam yo me bhaktyā prayacchati ।
tadahaṁ bhaktyupahṛtamaśnāmi prayatātmanaḥ ॥26॥

(Whatever man gives Me in true devotion, fruit or water, a leaf or a flower, I will accept it. The gift is love, his heart's dedication.) B. G. IX.26

Counselling Arjuna on the easiest way to freedom, He continues:

यत्करोषि यदश्नासि यज्जुहोषि ददासि यत् ।

यत्तपस्यसि कौन्तेय तत्कुरुष्व मदर्पणम् ॥२७॥

yatkarōṣi yadaśnāsi yajjuhoṣi dadāsi yat ।
yattapasyasi kaunteya tatkuruṣva madarpaṇam ॥27॥

शुभाशुभफलैरेवं मोक्षयसे कर्मबन्धनैः ।

संन्यासयोगयुक्तात्मा विमुक्तो मामुपैष्यसि ॥२८॥

śubhāśubhaphalairēvaṁ mokṣayase karmabandhanaiḥ ।
sannyāsayogayuktātmā vimukto māmupaiṣyasi ॥28॥

(Whatever your action, food or worship, whatever the gift that you give to another, whatever ascetic practices you undertake, O Kaunteya, offer them all as sacrifice unto Me.

Thus shalt thou be freed from the bondages of actions, bearing good and bad results; with your heart steadfast in the Yoga of renunciation and liberated, thou shalt come unto Me.)

B. G. IX. 27-28

10 The Philosophical Systems of Hinduism

Any system of thought based on reason is *Darshana*. In Sanskrit, philosophy is called darshana derived from 'dris' – meaning 'to see'. The object of philosophy is to enable its students to see Truth directly. The Hindu philosophical thought has been divided into six

main systems which helps its followers to gain *jnana* (wisdom) through any of these methods according to their different mental constitutions. They are:

1. The Nyaya of Gautama
2. The Vaisheshika of Kanada
3. The Sankhya of Kapila
4. The Yoga of Patanjali
5. The Purva Mimamsa of Jaimini
6. The Uttara Mimamsa or Vedanta of Vyasa.

They all accept the authority of the Vedas and agree that Atman exists. The Nyaya and the Vaisheshika explain how the world was created by God out of atoms and molecules and how the Knowledge of God, who is also the Inmost Spirit of man, can be gained. The Sankhya explains clearly the nature of *Purusha* (Spirit) and *Prakriti* (matter) and their relation to each other. The Yoga illustrates how the five gross senses, five organs of action, the subtler senses, and the vital forces can be manipulated and controlled by the seekers of God. The Mimamsa explains karma, its consequences, causes and effects and how it creates bondage to man. The Vedanta explains the true nature of Atman as unborn, eternal, deathless and immutable and shows that the jiva is in essence identical with the Self. The misery & suffering caused by avidya can be put to an end by ending the identification with the body, mind and intellect (non-self) and suffering, caused by avidya, by ending its identification with the body, mind and intellect (the not-Self). In its different phases, Vedanta represents the march of human thought beginning from dualism, passing through qualified non-dualism and ending in non-dualism, the total identity of the individual soul with the Universal Self – the highest limit beyond which human intellect and reasoning cannot go. We have to realize God in our own self and in nature and thus flower in divinity though rooted in matter. When the Upanishads deduce the Ultimate Truth, they do not lean on any authority, either their own or of God, but on positive experience and this contrast is striking between them and the theologies. Whereas theologians stress on dogmas, the Upanishads set out in great detail and systematically indicate the ways in which man can realize the divinity inherent in him.

11 The Supreme Self or The Ultimate Reality

Objects in the external world are perceived or comprehended by our five senses and five organs of action. But the Supreme Self is not an object to lend itself to sense perceptions, ideation or intellection. It cannot be imagined by the mind or reasoned out by our intellect as anything imagined or evaluated can only be a concept. But a concept is only an idea and can never become reality. Between a thing conceived and the real thing, there is a world of difference. The concept of a dog cannot bark or bite. The concept of a cow can never yield milk. Similarly a concept of God is only an idea and as such exists only in thought. So the three equipments in our hand, viz. the body, the mind and the intellect, though useful in our quest for Truth and can put us on the path, can never take us to the final goal. The self-existent Ultimate Reality can be intuited only by the inmost consciousness of man after he transcends the body, mind and intellect. This is possible and logical, because the jiva consciousness (minus the mind, intellect and vasanas) is in reality non-different from Universal Consciousness. The one Infinite Reality dyed in the colours of the *upadhis* (adjuncts) of the mind and intellect appears as the world of multiplicity. To realize that Infinite Self in ourselves, we have to break down our apparent limitations and burst the very bounds of existence filling the whole sky and the universe. So a definite plan of spiritual discipline for attaining God realization comes into view. The senses have to be controlled, and the mind and intellect have to be conquered. The individual has to erase the ego and sink

his total being in the Infinite Consciousness, keeping nothing back for himself, so that all distinctions between the subject and the object completely vanish.

12 The Four Ashramas

The concept of a graded development of inner powers in an ordered fashion, in the life of an individual, culminating in spiritual perfection, is a valuable original contribution of Hinduism for dignity, order and balance in society. The four divisions of life, through which everyone has to pass in successive stages, afford an opportunity for a symmetrical and harmonious development and unfoldment of personality. The jiva cannot make any appreciable progress in its journey towards perfection, if it pushes forward irregularly in various directions, led by a desire ridden mind, grasping at the things of one stage while yet in another and thus obstructing proper evolution in each. If an old man grabs at the joys of the youth, life is robbed of its serenity and usefulness, thus creating imbalance and disorder in an otherwise smooth and happy life. In order to avoid such a contingency, the wise rishis divided the life of an individual into four definite stages, called ashramas. *Brahmacharya* the stage of studentship, *Garhasthya* the stage of householdership, *Vanaprastha* the stage of forest – dwelling, i.e. seclusion and *Sannyasa* the stage of total renunciation, i.e. ascetism. Each ashrama has its own special duties clearly marked out. In none of these stages must the man grasp at the special duties of the other three: the student must not be a householder, the recluse must not seek again the pleasures of the householder, etc. Discharged and enjoyed each in its own stage, they lead to the orderly unfoldment of the individual consciousness. The plan is to gradually refine and transform the inclinations of the senses, mind and intellect so that whole life becomes a sadhana for attainment of the highest spiritual good.

The Brahmachari must be simple in habits, pure, chaste, obedient, alert, humble and industrious, must rise early, bathe, study and moderately eat plain food. The householder must be hospitable, unselfish, tender and compassionate and discharge his duties to God and manes. Having discharged his duties well and tamed his passions, he should retire to the forest, with his wife, for a somewhat secluded life, given to study and contemplation as a preparation for entering the last stage of life, when he has to give up totally the world in his search for Truth and Wisdom. The last stage of life, viz. Sannyasa or monastic life is to be walked singly. Though Sannyas is the culmination and fulfillment of the three previous stages, one yearning for liberation can become a monk at any stage. A Vedic injunction declares: “The day a man is possessed by real vairagya, he should forthwith renounce the world.” But one should not renounce in haste and repent later. So long as one’s mind hangs on ideas of security outside, so long as desires of senses drag one hither and thither, one should not embrace Sannyas. Sannyas is not forced isolation from the world. It is the inward withdrawal of the developed sages whose minds have become steady out of a sense of total fulfillment and completeness of joy, enjoyed and lived within. Such renunciates are totally free from all vulgar weaknesses and selfish ambitions. They are outside all caste distinctions and beyond all social conventions. They are the custodians and teachers of the spiritual culture and are shining examples of vairagya and renunciation, of peace and detachment. They literally die to the world and even funeral rites are performed when they leave their homes and become *parivrajakas* (homeless wanderers). They are naturally held in the highest esteem by society for their *tyaga* (renunciation), for their purity and detachment, serenity and constant life in God.

13 The Four Purusharthas

The life of an ordinary Hindu, from birth to death, is pierced through and through by religion, as it is all oriented to the goal of Moksha. The Hindu scheme of life has been perfectly planned and worked out by the Vedic seers in such a way that one attains to the goal easily and expeditiously.

The various inner aspirations of human life have been classified by the rishis of yore into a neat set of four ideals: *Dharma* (moral law), *artha* (wealth), *kama* (passions) and *moksha* (liberation). The highest aim of all human pursuits is Moksha – Liberation from all imperfections and limitations of a finite existence. But the loud voice of the hidden passions and itching desires of the human heart, which demand fulfillment in the worldly plane, cannot and should not be stifled. Man can learn only from experience and sufficient opportunity must be given for this, so that he can see for himself the worthlessness of worldly pursuits. By observation and experience, he should get gradually disillusioned about the glamour of the outer world which always clouds around him for attention. Man should choose God not by coercion but by his own sweet will, of his own free choice. Otherwise an unhealthy tradition is created affecting both the physical and psychological personalities. Any suppressed desire, if not sublimated and refined, will erupt in due course with a volcanic force. Our ancient rishis were well aware of this danger and so devised a scheme which at once provided for discipline and freedom, thus paving the way for a temperate living and a vigorous growth of all aspects of a man's personality. Life will lose all its richness, beauty and meaning without the disciplined pursuit of noble and definite values.

Only in the highest spiritual experience, can we have a sense of rest and fulfillment, of eternity and completeness. Ordinarily all life is a series of desires and there is never a moment in us when we are completely free from desires. The means of fulfillment come through *artha* (possession). So *artha* and *kama* have been recognized by the Hindu sages as two values of life. Our religion never condemns wealth. Wealth must be earned by legitimate means and put to good use by sharing it with others. Charity and timely help to the needy are possible only when one has riches. Without riches, even a moral and decent life becomes impossible. But wealth should be earned and *kama* (desires) satisfied only in accordance with the code of *Dharma*, never violating the moral law. *Dharma* is relevant to every activity in life. Its literal meaning is 'that which holds us to our true being.' Its secondary meanings are duties and virtues.

Artha should be put to such use and *kama* must be so regulated that they become conducive to the attainment of Moksha, which should at no stage be lost sight of. The happiness derived from the first three purusharthas are neither lasting nor completely satisfying, as they cannot quench the inner thirst of the soul which yearns for regaining its lost balance in God Consciousness. Manu's code of conduct in regard to the expending of one's wealth demands that a certain percentage of one's earnings should regularly go for charity. But man's endeavour should always be to float above all worldliness and not to get sunk in it. He should at no time become a prey to the possessive instinct which will choke his spiritual development and make even mundane existence miserable.

14 The Four Varnas

The Aryans divided themselves into four varnas (castes), viz. the priest, the soldier, the trader and the worker based on the talents people had and the professions they carried on, for a coordinated development of the society and its material and spiritual welfare. The criterion of caste was not the accident in birth but the inherent traits, conduct and occupational talents. Making the fullest use of the varying temperaments of the human mind and utilizing the differences to the maximum benefit and progressive well being of the social polity, people were divided into four classes so that all got equal (but not identical) opportunities for

evolutionary progress. A passage in the Rig Veda declares that all human beings form the physical body of the Cosmic Purusha:

ब्राह्मणोऽस्य मुखमासीत् बाहू राजन्यः कृतः ।

ऊरू तदस्य यद्वैश्यः पद्भ्यां शूद्रो अजायत ॥

brāhmaṇo'asya mukhamāsīt bāhū rājanyaḥ kṛtaḥ ।

ūrū tadasya yadvaiśyaḥ padbhyāṁ śūdro ajāyata ॥

(R. V. X. xc. 12)

The spiritual men (Brahmanas) form, as it were, His head, the warriors (kshatriyas) His arms, the merchants and traders His thighs and the labourers His feet. Every part of the body is a limb of the one whole and carries on an important function which, when coordinated, accounts for the strength and well being of the body. Brahmins were the custodians of learning and spirituality, the Kshatriyas were the kings, soldiers, leaders and military protectors, the Vaishyas were the traders, bankers and commercial men and the Shudras were the labourers, servants and manual workers. The loose occupational division slowly became rigid and hereditary. Vana Parva of the Mahabharata declares:

न योनिर्नापि संस्कारो न श्रुतं न च सन्ततिः ।

कारणानि द्विजत्वस्य वृत्तमेव तु कारणम् ॥

na yonirnāpi saṁskāro na śrutaṁ na ca santatiḥ ।

kāraṇāni dvijatvasya vṛttameva tu kāraṇam ॥

(M. B. V. P. ccc xiii.108)

(Not birth, nor samskaras, nor study of the Vedas, nor ancestry are the cause of being a *wija* (Dwija means twice-born, one who had a birth other than the natural one, by acquiring the heritage of the rishis left in the Vedas). Conduct alone is the cause thereof.)

Thus the original grouping was based on a division of labour contributing to a common end of a rich and perfect harmony in society. However, in actual practice, it was difficult to determine the aptitudes of each and every individual and fix his calling in a vast society. So heredity became the yardstick as a sort of efficient working principle, keeping in view the fact that normally the son took upon himself the same trade and inherited in him the same traits of his father. Atri declares:

“By birth everyone is a Shudra, by performing Upanayana he is called a dwija, by learning the Vedas he becomes a vipra and by realizing Brahman, he attains to the status of a Brahmana.”

Given here under are two quotations from Mahabharata:

सत्यं दानं क्षमा शीलमानृशंस्यं तपो घृणा ।

दृश्यन्ते यत्र नगेन्द्र स ब्राह्मण इति स्मृतः ॥

satyaṁ dānaṁ kṣamā śīlamānṛśaṁsyaṁ tapo ghṛṇā ।

dṛśyante yatra nagendra sa brāhmaṇa iti smṛutaḥ ॥

Truth, charity, forbearance, good conduct, gentleness, tapas and mercy, when these are seen, O Nagendra, he is called a Brahmana.

शूद्रेतु यद्भवेल्लक्ष्यं द्विजे तच्च न विद्यते ।

नैव शूद्रो भवेच्छूद्रो ब्राह्मणो न च ब्राह्मणः ॥

śūdretu yadbhavellakṣyaṁ dvije tacca na vidyate ।

naiva śūdro bhavecchūdro brāhmaṇo na ca brāhmaṇaḥ ॥

If these marks exist in a Shudra and not in a Brahmana, the Shudra is not a Shudra, nor the Brahmana a Brahmana.

As each soul is a part of Himself, a tiny spark thrown out by the same Divine Flame, an amsa of the same divine glory, all men, irrespective of their caste distinctions and occupational differences, command our equal respect.

Arrogance of caste superiority is a sin according to our shastras. Caste consciousness can be eradicated only if one is filled with regard for dharma, bhakti and jnana. A holy person or a wise man has no caste consciousness as he is full of bhakti and jnana. When dharma is overlooked in one's action, devotion ebbs in the heart and jnana gets eclipsed in the mind. Then caste distinctions get underlined.

15 Pancha Mahayajnas

There are five important daily sacrifices that Sanatana Dharma commands everyone to perform. They are:

- Brahma Yajna (sacrifice to rishis or Vedas)
- Deva Yajna (sacrifice to Devas or Gods)
- Pitru Yajna (sacrifice to departed ancestors)
- Nru Yajna (sacrifice to fellow-men)
- Bhuta Yajna (sacrifice to creatures or brute creation)

There is an outer aspect and an inner meaning to each of these, teaching man his relations with all around him – his superiors, his equals and his subordinates. The law of sacrifice as embodied in these five yajnas teach us that we are not isolated units, but part of a great whole, that our happiness and progress are secured, only when they sub serve the general happiness and conduce to the general progress. Hindu culture has always envisaged that all existence is One Consciousness overflowing individually in men, birds and beasts. While praying for the welfare of the humans, a Rig Veda mantra prays also for the welfare of animals:

Sanno astu dvipade sam chatushpade

(May prosperity abide by us the bipeds. May the same attend on the four legged ones!)

The outer aspect of Brahma Yajna is study and teaching of the Vedas and scriptures. Everyone should study some sacred book, deeply think about it, assimilate its teaching and the knowledge so gained should be shared with others. The inner meaning is that all study must be a yajna, learning in order that we may teach.

The outer aspect of Deva Yajna is Homa – a thanksgiving to the devas for the gracious favours conferred on us. The inner significance is that we should learn to live in harmony with nature, in accord with all that exists.

Pitru Yajna consists of *tarpana* – offering of water to ancestors. The real significance lies in the recognition of the great debt we owe to the past, to the generations that preceded ours by whose toil, labour and knowledge our lives stand improved and enriched.

Nru Yajna consists of hospitality to fellow men. Service to humanity by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and protecting the needy and the distressed in recognition of the divinity of man is its inner meaning.

Bhuta Yajna is the putting aside of a little food on the ground before beginning the meal for the visible and invisible lower entities around us and the placing of the left-overs in a suitable place for the vagrants and animals. This is in repayment of the debt we owe to our subordinates in the human and lower kingdoms and for elevating ourselves by the practice of kindness and consideration towards all living creatures.

These five yajnas, when duly performed with full understanding of their inner meaning, lead to a rich and beautiful life, both mundane as well as spiritual.

16 Karma and Rebirth

Karma literally means action, but generally denotes the aggregate of action and the result of action. To a very careful observer, it will be clear that things do not happen by accident, by chance, in a disorderly way. What is, is the result of what has been. Every result presupposes a cause; every reaction depends on the nature of the action. Measure for measure, life pays back good or bad. We sow a seed and reap a harvest. As we sow, so we reap. Having planted prickly cactus, we cannot expect to gather juicy apples. Our present life is conditioned by the thoughts and deeds of an earlier existence. The present is the product of the past and the future an extension of the present. By regulating the present, we can condition the future. Life can be made as horrible or as pleasant as we like. Every man is born in the world fashioned by himself and the design for our future life is also drawn up by us in the present.

Karma has a cosmic as well as a psychological aspect. All deeds have their fruits in the world and effects on the mind, in the form of *vasanas* – subtle impressions which remain with the doer even after an act is outwardly accomplished. These impressions, etched deep on the mind, play an important role in moulding a man's future, not only here on earth but after death as well. The good and evil tendencies, joys and sorrows of his life are the inevitable consequences of actions done in the previous lives. The present actions determine those of the next. This conviction led the Hindus to regard the pain and suffering of this life as self-inflicted and accept them with resignation and calmness. Thus the law of karma, which is the application of the moral law of cause and effect, also serves as an incentive to right action. The so-called destiny has after all been shaped by the accumulated effect of our past actions performed in a spirit of free will and with prudence in the present, we can always order a bright and luminous future by a life of selfdiscipline and virtuous living. The joy and suffering of the world are there for the progressive education of character. Man has to guard his thoughts very carefully and should not allow evil thoughts to invade his heart at any time, as that will forge another chain of bondage and ensure nothing but disaster for him. Life is like a game of cards in the shuffling and distribution of which we have no choice. But a good player, even with a poor hand, will see possibilities, skillfully play and win the game, while a bad player even with a good hand will make a mess of the game and lose it. In the stage of life, karma sets the scenes but cannot decide the fate of the actor. Karma is, therefore, a condition and not destiny.

Our physical body is the effect of karma working by installments. It is thrown off when one installment is worked out in an individual life. Till karma is exhausted or eliminated or burnt *in toto*, life overflows with births and deaths. At the time of dissolution of the body, the karma remains in a seed form in the jiva and the seed, thus carried on, develops when it takes up another body for higher evolution.

Extending our observation to existence as a whole and not restricted to this one life, the immensity of the karma that the individual soul has earned in its countless wanderings in the circuit of samsara can only be imagined. It is impossible for the jiva to experience and exhaust all this in one birth as its lifetime is brief and that too riddled with pain and disease. So a small fraction of the total karma is allotted to the jiva to be worked out in this birth. This is called *prarabdha karma* which is compared to an arrow already released from the bow. The course of *prarabdha* cannot be stopped as it has already become operative. When *prarabdha* ends, the body falls and the jiva winds up its existence here and departs. The totality of the karma that has been hoarded up by the jiva from the past is called *sanchita*, a fraction of which is *prarabdha*. Karma waiting for expression in future births is called *agami karma*. It is the karma which the soul gathers in the process of exhausting its karma in various births. The moment *jnana* is gained, all the *sanchita* and *agami* karma are totally burnt and *papa* (sin) evaporates with *punya* (merit), but *prarabdha* remains and is operative (to the eyes of the onlooker), till life detaches itself from the body. But as the *jnani* identifies himself only with Brahman and never with the body, in his view, there is no *prarabdha* also.

The doctrine of *punar janma* or Rebirth is the necessary counterpart of the theory of karma and the indestructibility of the soul. As the result of actions performed during the sojourn of the jiva on earth cannot be completely exhausted before death, the law of cause and effect, which governs all actions, imposes a rebirth on the soul, time and again. The Christian conception of eternal reward or everlasting torment must have seemed most illogical to the scientific mind of the Hindu seers. It is against the dignity of inexorable justice and inconsistent with the law of karma in that the erring soul is not given a chance to rectify its mistake. It is inconceivable that acts done in a single lifetime, handicapped in countless ways, should bear fruit that will last for eternity. What faith declares, reason should ratify. Any philosophy must be fortified by reason and warranted by experience.

17 Life After Death

According to the Vedantic tradition, the after death journey of the jiva lies through any one of the following five courses:

1. Those who gain *jnana* or Self Knowledge, even while alive, merge in all pervading Brahman and as they attain liberation, there is no question of their going or coming.
2. Those *sadhakas* who never swerve from the dharmic path and constantly engage themselves in contemplative meditation on Brahman, but die before gaining spiritual wisdom, repair to Brahmaloka through the path of the good (*devayana*) and get liberated in due course (*krama mukti*). Some, however, return to this planet for re-incarnation and self perfection.
3. Those who meticulously follow the karma kanda, perform rituals as per shastric injunctions, but cherish a desire to enjoy the fruits of actions, go to the Chandraloka through the path of manes. After enjoying immense happiness for a long time as a reward for their meritorious acts on the earth, they return to the earth when once the *punya* is exhausted.

4. those whose actions are totally against all religious ethics take sub-human bodies, go to Naraka (hell) and suffer till their sin is exhausted. Then, back they must return to the mortal pathway.
5. Those who act cruelly with evil intentions and are sinful, malicious and totally vile, spend many births in the animal and plant kingdoms, slowly evolve and return to Bhuloka (earth) in the long run with human bodies.

After every death there is life, and after every life there is death and, in reality, death is just a change of state, not a break in continuity. From the Vedantic standpoint, death is just like a sleep and the after-death experiences a dream – a comment on the lost life. Just as dream experiences are a replica of the waking life, the nature of the after-death experiences depends on the pattern of life, thoughts and actions that the jiva had while on earth and can be classified as heaven or hell (both are dreamlands in truth) according to the nature of the experiences which are pleasant or painful. Just as we wake up from dreams, the soul wakes up, after this sleep and dream, and finds itself reborn on earth as a human being. It totally forgets its previous existence and takes up the thread of life from the point where it has left and proceeds on its journey to perfection. Thus, in its march to the goal of self-perfection and Final Release in God, there are no breaks though there may be many twists and turns and running up into byways as well as occasional slips. Just as dream experiences are perfectly true and real to the dreamer as long as the dream lasts, the after death experiences, though of the nature of dreams, are totally vivid and terribly real as long as they persist and may at times seem to cover hundreds of human years.

But the jiva is not to be tied down for ever to the wheel of births and deaths. The ropes that tether it to the wheel are its multi-pronged desires. So long as the jiva has a fancy and attraction for the objects on earth, it must come back to the earth to possess and enjoy these. But when the things and persons on earth lose all their power to tempt it, all bonds are broken and the jiva becomes free. All jivas will ultimately reach perfection and become free. For the time being, the jivas get what they want – liberation or bondage. Slowly the illusion of happiness in the things that really chain the jiva to samsaric misery is overcome and the jiva chooses, once for all, freedom from all wants and limitations and gets jnana.

In dreams, the subject himself appears as the dreamer (the one who dreams) and the dreamt (the objects and beings perceived by the dreamer). Similarly, in our long sleep of death, we ourselves become the heaven or the hell and we ourselves are the enjoyers in heaven or the victims of suffering in the hell, while in truth we are above both. Vedanta proves that even this solid-seeming world of the waking state is unreal, is in no way different from our dreams. It is our own Self that becomes the subject as the jiva and the objects like cities, rivers, the sun, the moon, the stars, the sky, the earth etc., while in fact the Real Self is neither the finite jiva nor the objects and beings with whom it moves. But when the drama is on, we are all actors performing in various scenes.

18 Heaven and Hell

There is a lot of difference between the Western idea of heaven and hell and the Hindu concept of *Svarga* and *Naraka*. To the Hindu, heaven and hell are states of the mind and not places of resort. Immortality does not mean survival of the body but eternal life. While the Western nations believe that celestial pleasures (earthly pleasures heightened) are the highest ideals of life, Hinduism explains that celestial pleasures too are not eternal as they are available only for limited durations of time. Heaven borrows its colours from the earth and

the painted joys of heaven are rewards invoked by virtues – effect springing from a cause and while the cause is finite, the effect cannot be infinite. When cause is exhausted, effect also has to cease. Heaven is only a temporary haven of rest for the weary but good soul which has to stage a comeback sometime when all punya is exhausted. Similar is the case of the soul victimized in the hell and an eternity of torment is unjustifiable when the scales of justice are held even. Christianity believes that the soul has a beginning but has no end, as it lives in heaven or hell for all eternity. But, if the soul has a beginning it must have an end. Facts of experience eloquently demand that if something starts in time, it should also stop. A string can never have only one end. Hinduism asserts that we are all made up of the stuff of Immortality and that our alienation from our real Self is the cause of all ills, miseries and tragedies of life. Immortality to the Hindu is not a postmortem prospect promised on faith, but a here and now experience while life lingers in this very body.

19 Worship

The endeavour of religion is to bridge the gulf between man and God and restore the lost unity. It is a progressive attempt at self realization – a lifting up of our empirical ego to the transcendental plane and the process by which it is effected is called *sadhana*. To keep one's mind single-tracked on God Consciousness is not a small thing, especially in the face of an uncomprehending and hostile world, where only a very few are disposed towards a higher life.

Tapas is a persistent endeavour to dwell in the Supreme and manifest the divinity in the day-to-day life. It is the pooling up of all our resources and energies and focussing them on the Supreme Goal. *Tapas* in its day-to-day aspect is *anushtana*. *Anushtana* is the attempt of the individual mind to get back to the depths of one's being constantly and develop a spiritual communion with the Divine Self.

Hinduism affirms that the Supreme is both formless and with form, as the two sides of the same coin: *formless* when viewed in itself and not in relation to the universe (hence beyond sense-perception, ideation and intellection) and with *form* when thought of in relation to the world as its creator, sustainer and destroyer. Brahman appears as *Ishwara* by projecting His power of *Maya* and to bless the worshipper, *Ishwara* manifests Himself in the same identical way in which the devotee comprehends Him. Every manifestation is one face of the Supreme and devotion to any one of these forms will lead a seeker to *jnana* and *mukti*.

The nature of the human mind is always to hold on to something. It is extremely difficult for the untutored mind to comprehend anything abstract. God, as He is, is the Impersonal, Relationless, Absolute, beyond name and form, and is of the nature of Pure Consciousness. But this lofty conception is beyond the reach of the common run of men. The direct method of realization of Brahman is through the *Jnana Marga* (the Path of Knowledge); but even an entrance into its portals is restricted to a few highly qualified aspirants whose minds blaze with the fire of *vairagya*. So except for a minute percentage, the majority require a tangible symbol of Truth and a warm and affectionate human relationship with a Personal God. God in the form chosen by us is our *Ishta Deva*. The effulgence of Pure Consciousness radiates through the vesture of name and form in the *Ishta Deva*. The devotee catches a glimpse of the Absolute through the Personal god who is the highest manifestation of the Infinite that a finite mind can comprehend in the relative plane. Worship of a Personal god is the easier way open to all. Everyone of us wants to love and be loved and worship fulfils this basic need of man. When Sage Vyasa, the compiler of the four Vedas and the author of the eighteen puranas, even after he wrote the *Brahma Sutras* and the *Mahabharata*, could not find peace, Narada advised him to sing the glories of the Lord, and by writing the *Bhagavata*, in which we find a

glorious combination of intense devotion and elevating jnana, Vyasa won the peace he did not gain before.

Bhakti is the constant striving for *Brahma Sakshatkara* (the attachment of the finite self's identity with the Infinite Self) by devotion to a personal and intimate God through a symbol. All religion is symbolic and symbolism can be got rid of only when religion itself perishes. The way to the Imperishable Brahman lies through Saguna Brahman. From Saguna to Nirguna it is but just one step. Though initially the devotee starts to seek out the Outward God, as something different and external to him, he ends up in realizing Him as also the innermost Self in which everything, including his finite self, melts and gets fused.

Worship is a means of pouring forth our love to the Supreme, of our reverence towards Him, of our aspiration to reach Him in conscious communion and of our longing to be united with Him. The devotee directs his whole being to God and draws himself near to the Divine by hearing about the sports of the lord, by singing His glories, by meditation on His power, wisdom and goodness, by constant remembrance with a devout heart and by doing all acts as His service. He serves Him with all that he has, worships Him with flowers, prostrates before Him, enjoys His intimate fellowship and loving kindness and surrenders himself at His feet. The joy of devotion thrills his entire being and fills his heart with waves after waves of ecstasy. In due course of time, the relation between the worshipper and the worshipped becomes intimate and a conscious communion starts between the two. This cardinal experience gives an undoubting immediate sense of God. It is as if one is touched gently at every point by an assuring hand – sympathetic, loving and affectionate – and the effect in the heart of the devotee is an essential and enduring happiness. When the reassuring presence of God is needed most by the devotee, far beyond half-way, God hastens to meet him. If the devotee brings himself to a state of complete surrender to the Divine, he becomes the focal point of God's constant care, affection and grace and the entire responsibility for his welfare is then assumed by God. Sri Rama's proclamation to his divine bountifulness is worth mentioning here:

सकृदेव प्रपन्नाय तवास्मीति च याचते ।

अभयं सर्वभूतेभ्यो ददाम्येतदव्रतं मम ॥

sakṛudeva prapannāya tavāsmīti ca yācate ।

abhayaṁ sarvabhūtebhyo dadāmyetadavratam mama ॥

[To him who but once has resigned himself (to Me) for protection, who implores saying 'I am Thine', I afford freedom from fear from all creatures. This indeed is my solemn vow.]

Sri Krishna confirms this pledge in the Bhagavad Gita when he tells Arjuna:

सर्वधर्मान्परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं ब्रज ।

अहं त्वा सर्वपापेभ्यो मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुचः ॥६६॥

sarvadharmānparityajya māmekaṁ śaraṇaṁ vraja ।

aham tvā sarvapāpebhyo mokṣayiṣyāmi mā śucaḥ ॥66॥

[Relinquishing all duties at my feet take refuge in Me. Cast off all fear, for, I shall free you from all sins and bondage.] (B. G. xviii – 66)

The Lord may be adored as Shiva or Vishnu, as Lalitha or Lakshmi, as Rama, Krishna, Buddha or Christ. Sri Krishna asserts:

ये यथा मां प्रपद्यन्ते तांस्तथैव भजाम्यहम् ।

मम वर्तमानुवर्तन्ते मनुष्याः पार्थ सर्वशः ॥११॥

ye yathā mām prapadyante tāmstathaiva bhajāmyaham ।

mama vartmānuvartante manuṣyāḥ pārtha sarvaśaḥ ॥11॥

[Howsoever men approach Me, even so do I accept them, for the path that men take from every side is Mine.] (B. G. iv – 11)

The devotee can choose whichever form he likes best and in all these forms, it is only He who shines. The object of worship is the same Ishwara, though the forms may differ according to the taste of the individual. The quarrels over the forms are simply foolish and ignorant.

Puja is the general, simple form of worship. A room is kept apart in the house exclusively for purposes of worship. This is called the Shrine Room, where the members of the household usually assemble during puja time after taking an early morning bath and donning a clean dress. Some pictures of God, of the family Guru, of acharyas and images are kept in front of the worshipper's seat. Bhajans and sankirtans are sung by all the members. The worshipper first invokes the presence of the deity in the image and then treats the God he has so invited, as he would an honoured guest. The image is bathed, dressed and decorated, food, water and flower offerings are made, incense and camphor are burnt and lights are waved. To the Hindu, religion is more personal than congregational and so each member may follow his own method of *nama japa* (silent repetition of the Lord's name), *archana* (offering flowers with devotion), *nevedaya* (food offering) and *arati* (waving of light) After *namaskar* (prostration) comes *dhyana* (meditation) when one sits silently, closing the eyes and also the avenues of other senses. The Lord is seated in the lotus of the heart, the mind is allowed to dwell on his glories, all dross is emptied therefrom and the entire mind space is filled up with the Light of Divine Consciousness. A regular sitting for at least fifteen minutes a day, both in the morning and in the evening, helps one to gain astonishing will power, mental clarity, concentration, abiding joy and peace of mind, besides good health and gradual conquest of mind. The Bhagavad Gita is very sacred to every Hindu and so a religious Hindu does *parayana* (regular reading) of at least three or four chapters of it every day. Bhakti slowly leads to *prapatti* (total surrender). The difference between bhakti and prapatti is symbolized by the *markata kishora nyaya* (the ape way) and the *marjara kishora nyaya* (the cat way). In the former the young ape clings fast to the mother and is saved, while in the latter, the mother cat takes the kitten in the mouth and the young one does nothing to secure its safety. The little effort called for in the former is dispensed with in the latter. If one can totally surrender oneself to God, God takes the complete responsibility of the devotee till he attains salvation in Him.

20 The Jivanmukta

Life is best lived when man and God meet in life, when man lifts himself up to the state of Godhead by acquisition of spiritual wisdom. The jivanmukta is a liberated soul, even while living. All our scriptures eulogize, with unbounded enthusiasm, the state of a jivanmukta. The Bhagavad Gita extols him as a 'sthitaprajna' – a man of steady wisdom and as one who is beyond all wants and beyond the reach of all evil. He remains ever satisfied in the Self, enjoys sweet repose, for, cravings torment him not, adversity and happiness affect him no more. He is free from fear, free from anger and free from the things of desire. Uninfluenced

by praise and blame, uncoloured by mental moods, he remains in peace and blessedness, in perfect control of his senses. His wisdom is steady, his senses are subdued and his mind is tranquil. All ideas and fancies are blotted out, all tormenting woes disappear. Free from attachment, attraction and aversion, peaceful and happy, he roams about. He is unattached, pure, egoless and blissful; the afflictions of the normal world plague him no more. Sunk in transempirical Bliss, he remains totally unidentified with the physical body, but is always aware of his spiritual identity with whatever exists in creation. He is unruffled by the pairs of opposites and looks upon all with an eye of equality. Whether tormented by the wicked or worshipped by the good, he remains unmoved. He transcends the Vedas, puranas and scriptures. He is beyond the imperatives of ethics, but he is a law unto himself. His actions are free but not whimsical, spontaneous but not unrighteous. Love and compassion, humility and goodness, sympathy, understanding, kindness and a host of other precious virtues cling to him and adorn him like shining jewels. Men of realization live freely and independently and may sleep without fear or anxiety in cremation grounds and dense forests. Vivekachudamani of Sri Sankara speaks about them in glowing terms:

“Sometimes a fool, sometimes a sage, sometimes possessed of regal splendour, sometimes wandering, sometimes behaving like a motionless python, sometimes wearing a benignant expression; sometimes honoured, sometimes insulted, sometimes unknown – thus lives the man of realization, every happy with Supreme Bliss.”

“Though without riches yet ever content, though helpless yet very powerful, though detached from sense-objects but ever eternally satisfied, though working yet inactive, though experiencing fruits of actions yet untouched by them, though possessed of a body yet without identification with it, though limited yet omnipresent is he.” (Vivekachudamani, 542 – 544)

Like ordinary men, he may sleep, bathe, eat, drink, work and rest, may appear to undergo suffering, illness and grief, but the affectation is just superficial; nothing can touch the inner core of his consciousness, where he has his constant dwelling. Nothing in the world has the power to snap his communion with the Divine, nothing can pull him out of his ‘inward-drawn’ nature. He lives in the world, like a lotus leaf, untouched by worldliness; he seems more like a visitor from a distant planet than a native of earth, never taking roots or never having his moorings anywhere in the world. The body, this elemental frame – hangs on him like a shirt. He lives in the world so long as prarabdha karma continues, and with the exhaustion of prarabdha, he discards his body as one would his wornout garments. As water poured into water, as milk poured into milk, becomes one with it, the jivanmukta, absorbed in Brahman, becomes one with Brahman. Even while living, world has never a sway over him and hence after death also, he doesn’t get involved in transmigratory existence. Only such an enlightened soul keeps religion alive, not the erudite theologians.

21 Ethical and Moral Teachings of Hinduism

Ethics stands for the Science of Morals as well as the rules of conduct. The Vedas, which are the earliest literary records of India, abound in passages where the greatest emphasis is laid on *Rta* (the moral order of the world) and an ethical way of life. The Vedic statements are *aapta vachana*, sayings of the wise for the greatest good of humanity.

Morality stands for truthfulness, unselfishness, love and compassion for fellow-beings, self-sacrifice and charity towards all living creatures.

The object of morality is to secure the welfare of all beings and this is done by showing men, through the science of conduct, how to live in harmony with each other and with their surroundings. The harmonious pattern of life, sponsored by the Hindu religion, covers every aspect of life, private and public, individual and social. It describes in detail how and when worship is to be done, lays down a disciplinary code and enumerates the various virtues and vices in personal relationships. All that is mean and vile should shrivel and die. There should be purity from lust and resentment, freedom from passion and desire. The raging passions of the human breast and the burning hunger for the gratification of the senses have to be overcome with a stern mind. All the dark shades in our mental makeup serve as a fertile breeding ground for a series of causes and effects which keep the soul in thralldom and misery. The only method to escape this evil is first to discipline our lower nature according to the ideals of *yama* and *niyama* – the two powerful weapons that the adorable Vedic seers have handed down to us to tame ourselves and then tread the further stages of the spiritual path. The whole range of ethical and moral principles that can be thought of has been compressed by the learned rishis of yore into the first two limbs of the eightfold path of yoga and handed down to us. The practices included in *yama* are, in a general way, moral and prohibitive, while those in *niyama* are disciplinal and constructive. The former aims at laying the ethical foundation and the latter at organizing the life of the *sadhaka* for the final ascent from the human to the divine. The moral and mental discipline, thus enumerated, is designed to root out the conceit of the self.

The religious Hindu has the firm conviction that there is an intrinsic unity in the midst of extrinsic variety. Beneath the common husk of things, there is a transcendental essence. The presence of God throbs in the heart of all beings, and a Hindu's single aim in life is to realize this underlying unity of existence. Life on earth is a stage in the progressive effort of the soul to perfection and self-conquest a vital step in the path to the Supreme.

The Prophet of Nazareth commands: "Love thy neighbour as thyself", but no reason is given as to why we should do so. The Vedas go far ahead of this and proclaim '*Tat tvam asi*' (That Thou Art) which gives, according to Dr. Deussen, 'in three words metaphysics and morals together.' Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself because thou art thy neighbour in spirit. The so-called neighbour is in reality yourself in another form. This knowledge that we are essentially the Pure Atman strikes at the root of narrow views based on selfishness and is the foundation of all ethics. This Higher Self is of the nature of bliss, as displayed in our instinctive love of self. To recognize it in others is to bring about social harmony, for no one will be inclined to harm oneself. Human relations gain in value and significance because of the immanence of God in man. Duty, virtue, love and good conduct lead not only to order and progress in society, but also become factors that please the Lord and secure for us His Grace.

Yamas (from the Sanskrit word 'yam' – to restrain) are five in number and are forms of self-restraint. They are *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (honesty, non-stealing), *Brahmacharya* (continence, celibacy, spiritual mindedness) and *aparigraha* (freedom from greed).

Not causing injury to others in thought, word or deed constitutes *ahimsa*, the greatest of all virtues. One has to keep the mind free from animosity, resentment and malicious thoughts. An undesirable mental habit can be changed by substituting in its place a mental habit of an exactly opposite kind – hatred by love, dishonesty by uprightness and harshness in speech by sweetness and softness. *Ahimsa* consists according to Vyasa, in bearing ill-will towards none. Gradually this seemingly negative ideal of harmlessness blooms into the positive and dynamic life of love, both in its aspect of tender compassion towards all creatures and in its practical form – service.

Satya is far more than truthfulness. It is strict avoidance of untruthfulness in speech and action like exaggeration and pretence. It must be accompanied by gentleness in action.

Asteya is abstaining from stealing and misappropriations of all kinds. One should not take even credit for things he has not done or privileges to which he is not entitled.

Brahmacharya is quest for and delight in Brahman. In its restricted sense, it stands for sexual control of thought, speech and action.

Aparigraha is absence of covetousness and non-acceptance of gifts. But a better definition will be non-possessiveness. This consists in not accumulating more than what is absolutely essential for sustenance.

Niyamas are also five in number. They are:

Shaucha: Purity and cleanliness, both external and internal. External purity leads to detachment from one's own body and the bodies of others. From internal purity springs concentration, self-control and fitness for inner illumination.

Tapas (Austerity): All conscious selfdenials at all the three levels of body, mind and speech, whereby the individual reduces his indulgence in the outside world to the minimum, go to constitute tapas. Tapas is a persistent endeavour to dwell in the divine level and build up a transfigured life by putting an end to the vulgarity and meanness of the low human nature. It is the gathering up of all the energies that go waste by dissipation in endless channels and concentrating them all on the one Supreme Goal of selfunfolding.

Santosa (contentment): Cultivation of this virtue is the result of prolonged self-discipline. It means perfect satisfaction with what one has and, therefore, implies equanimity under all conditions and times. It is based on indifference to all personal enjoyments, comforts and other considerations, by giving up the ego sense completely.

Swadhyaya (Self-study): Study of scriptures and incantation of mantras and divine names is a must, if one is not to lose sight of the goal. By reading, musing and reflection, an individual gets a deeper insight into the problems of a spiritual life and one pointed absorption of the mind in the object of its quest.

Iswarapranidhana (Surrender): This is total submission to God, by surrendering all actions and their fruits to Him. This attitude of surrender results in the unseating of the ego and enables the mind to feel the presence of the Supreme Being in oneself and all around.

22 Our Religious Practices and Karmanushtana

In the West, religion is organized in the form of the Church, but Sanatana Dharma never imposes itself on its followers as an institutional religion. Religion to the Hindu is strictly personal, as God, though common to all, is personal to the individual. It acquires its vitality by private practice and not by public propaganda. If religion is to take a deep root amidst the rot that is going on everywhere, individual life has to be fortified with *achara* (good conduct), *niyama* (disciplined control and constancy) and *anushtana* (practice in the day to day life). If decency and order are to be preserved in life, and if life is not to degenerate into chaos and sink in gloom, we have to restrain ourselves with certain disciplines, so that we do not act wrongly goaded by instincts of lust and anger. Indulgence in unbridled passions and an indisciplined life are experiments in disaster; they will ensure nothing but ruin and misery for

us. If we are guided by jnana in all our activities we can get rid of the shackles of kama (lust), krodha (anger) and other passions that keep us bound to the worldly pleasures and penalize us with repeated births and deaths. Yajna (sacrifice), dana (charity), tapas (austerity) and karma (right action) lead to jnana. When the prescribed karmas and anushtanas are performed with faith and devotion and dedicated to God as taught by the Vedas, mind gets purified and leads to attainment of spiritual wisdom and God realization. Anushtana chastens the mind and fills the heart with devotion to God. All of us should learn and observe karmanushtanas as explained in the Dharma Shastras. We should ceaselessly practice withdrawing the senses from material pleasures without being enticed by them. All desires are claims of the ego and hence indulgence in sense pleasure can never lead one to enduring peace and joy. Only by regular practice and by obtaining the grace of the guru, by daily meditation on Him, can an individual master his senses, root out the ego and rule with life. The *anugraha* (grace) of the guru and the *abhyasa* (practice) and *vairagya* of the *shishya* (disciple) are essential for success in life, both spiritual and mundane. Most people waste their lives in the complacent belief that self-mastery and attainment of jnana are reserved only for a handful of the great souls. This is a mistaken notion. Even the most sin-stained individual can improve fast, once *vairagya* dawns and faith in God takes a deep root in his heart. Every Hindu should get by heart some stotras and recite them daily in the puja room. The prescribed daily karmas are six in number: *Snanam* (bath), *sandhya* (worship offered at dawn and dusk), *japam*, *homam*, *athithyam* and *vaishvadeva*. *Snanam* should be performed before dawn, uttering the name of God. Those that have the *adhikara* (qualification) for it should perform the *sandhyopasana* (the twilight prayers) in which *pranayama* (control of the vital forces), *arghya* (offering of water to the sun) and recitation of Gayatri Mantra are important. While *snana* cleanses the body, *sandhya* purifies the mind. The Hindu scriptures do not grow weary of singing about the merits that flow out of the regular performance of *sandhya* adorations. *Homa* consists of *aupasana* and *agnihotra*, though in most families both are not observed now. *Vaishvadeva* is offering food to whatever has life. It is a sort of atonement for the sins involved while cutting vegetables and cooking everyday. *Athithyam* is honour and hospitality to guests and feeding them. If no guests are available, a cow or a crow at least should be fed. Life abounds in ills of every description and so we must have something to hold on to in order to keep ourselves steady and floating. Some mantra, some *japa*, some *anushtana* is necessary to sustain and uplift us. Then we will not stray into wrong unhealthy ways of life. This will also maintain and strengthen the unity in the family and avoid the modern trend of disintegration. The family is the basic unit of a society and care should be taken to see that it does not simply drift into a congregation of individuals without any connecting bond between the members.

23 Attainment of God Consciousness – Main Approaches

The urge to escape from the choking individual consciousness and the environment is in every one of us almost all the time. Release from bondage and liberation in Infinite Consciousness is the highest goal set by Hinduism. In climbing to the summit of perfection, our religion recognizes the need for a variety of approaches as all men are not identical. As individuals differ in character and mental attitude, equipment and endowments, and as God is to be realized in one's own heart, all seekers cannot proceed along the same path. Humanity is not just a mass of clay to be pressed and shaped into one particular mould. Each seeker has to see his fitness and competence, need and qualification and choose a path most suited to him out of the four broad categories of spiritual disciplines available to him, viz., Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Raja Yoga and Jnana Yoga. Each *marga* is called a Yoga (from the root 'yuj' – to join) as it enables its followers to attain union with the divine.

Karma Yoga consists in performing one's duty in a disinterested but perfect way without considerations of personal gain or loss, as service unto God, and is suitable for the active type.

And here Hinduism's insistence is on action without attachment. Bhakti Yoga appeals to the bulk of humanity as it affords enormous scope for expression of love and devotion – the two predominant basic instincts in human nature – and is ideal for the emotional type. Here the insistence is on devotion; but jnana is not subordinated, only raised, vitalized and fulfilled. The introspective type will be benefited by following the path of psychic control, viz., Raja Yoga. The fourth approach is through Jnana Yoga, the realization and knowledge of the true nature of the Self and the world, and here the insistence is on knowledge. Men of refined intellect and a keen power of discrimination will find Jnana Marga ideally suited to them.

Selfless work helps others as well as oneself. Karma Yoga clears the way to jnana by purifying the mind and leading to non-attachment. There can be at no time freedom *from* action, but only freedom *in* action. Work we must, not as slaves in bondage but as masters in freedom. While selfish work imprisons one in bondage, selfless action leads to freedom.

Direct all your love, adoration and affections to God and cling to Him with all your strength and power. Love towards God should become like a raging fire, burning, scorching and consuming everything that stands in the way of communion between the devotee and the deity. The whole being has to be surrendered to Him and the entire consciousness raised up to dwell in this divine plane. The madness of divine love burns all the dross in the heart and takes one to the Supreme Being. This is Bhakti Yoga.

The Raja Yoga prescribes a precise and scientific method of spiritual discipline in Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi. The eightfold practice sets out in detail a practical method, which if faithfully followed, restrains the mind from straying outward, controls the senses, manipulates the internal forces, withdraws the mind inwardly, fastens the mind to one idea and enables us to concentrate constantly on the one ideal and to transcend the mind in *samadhi* (absorption in the Self) and attain full illumination. These practices are meant to tame the obdurate mind and subdue the riotous senses, so that they become helpers and not hinderers in the spiritual march of the soul. According to Patanjali, devotion to a Personal God is a very valuable aid in yogic sadhana. Through dhyana (concentration) and samadhi, one gains the Vision of Truth. Perfection in Raja Yoga means the attainment of the state of Consciousness wherein there is no bondage, no limitation and no modification of mind. There is complete control of inner nature and absolute mastery over oneself leading to Pure Awareness.

Then we come to Jnana Yoga. The Vedas declare that the entire universe consisting of the sentient as well as the insentient things is a manifestation of the Para Brahman (the Supreme Self), which is eternal, non-dual and immutable. All jivas have issued out of this, like sparks from a flame. The realization that the individual soul is non-different from Brahman is Moksha or liberation. The rare genius in these wisdom-seekers, after thoroughly examining all enjoyments, here and hereafter, is fully convinced of their littleness and futility and so sees no attraction in them. Nothing short of Truth can satisfy these Jnana Margis. They struggle hard and stake everything, near and dear, for the realization of their true identity as the Nondual Self.

This spiritual Path of Knowledge has been inculcated for those whose minds have been wholly withdrawn from the sense objects and whose critical intelligence is convinced that the world, as the world, is unreal (but not non-existent) and illusory and that Brahman alone Is.

To think of the world as a concrete reality is the defect of a limping intellect; the pluralistic universe is an error of judgement. The actual is different from the apparent. We have to discriminate constantly between the real (Self) and the unreal (non-Self), shake off the unreal – the shadows – and cling to the real at all times. The One in the many, the fundamental unity

behind the cosmic variety has to be discerned and all false identifications with the *anaatman* (non-Self) must be ended. We must get reoriented to Brahman, which we have always been.

Though Jnana Marga is the direct path of spiritual realization, it does not eschew acts or devotion but includes them and eventually transcends them.

Whatever may be the approach one takes, success in the spiritual life is not for the weak-minded. **नायमात्मा बलहीनेन लभ्यः** (nāyamātmā balahīnena labhyaḥ) – declares the Upanishad. There should be a sustained interest and intense vairagya, a resolute determination, an adamant will and grim perseverance.

Let every seeker remember the vow of the Buddha before he sat for a marathon knock at the citadel of Enlightenment and imbibe a little of that vairagya:

इहासने शुष्यते मे शरीरं
 त्वगस्थि मांसं प्रलयं च यातु ।
 अप्राप्य बोधिं बहुकल्पदुर्लभां
 नैवासनात् कायं एतत् चलिष्यति ॥

ihāsane śuṣyate me śarīraṁ
 tvagasthi māṁsaṁ pralayaṁ ca yātu ।
 aprāpya bodhiṁ bahukalpadurlabhāṁ
 naivāsanāt kāyaṁ etat calipyati ॥

[Let my body dry up in this seat. Let my skin, bone and flesh perish. Without attaining to that Enlightenment which is difficult of being attained even in many ages, this body will not move from this seat.]

When the jiva realizes, by practice of one or more of these paths, that it is Brahman, it sheds its empirical vision attains oneness with the whole existence goes out of the pale of transmigratory existence for ever and sorrow comes to an end forever.

24 Guru Marga – The Fifth Way

Hinduism lays great emphasis on the necessity of a guru (Preceptor) for self realization. Not all can be gurus; only the Awakened Ones, in whom ignorance has been completely burnt, are entitled to that privilege. Walking the spiritual path without the guidance of such a noble soul makes the journey tedious and tiresome. Though any of the four approaches, singly or in suitable combination, can take one to the summit of realization, individual struggle is fraught with many a danger and soon throws one into moods of gloom and despair, prompting one to forsake the path and go astray. The unwary seeker will grope in the dark alleys and fumble in the by-lanes of spiritual quest, unless the unsleeping eyes of the compassionate guru keep a careful watch over him. So, in addition to the four broad ways described in the last chapter, there is another easy and safe way, though perhaps that will be the least appealing to most of us. It is called the Guru Marga. It consists in presenting the profiles of enlightened souls and asking the seekers to gradually approximate themselves to those ideals. Just as the molten metals poured into suitable moulds turn out into beautiful images, even so the seeker whose

heart is wet with devotion and whose mind is ablaze with renunciation slowly grows into the guru's likeness by constant association and living with him. In this age of spiritual bankruptcy, only the enlightened ones can show to humanity the way to salvation.

The guru relieves one from the clutches of ignorance, interprets the irking problems of life and teaches what is real and what is unreal. The pupil hears about the truth of this from all possible angles from the teacher, who speaks from personal experience and quotes from the scriptures, meditates upon it and strives to realize it. The guru should be accorded equal reverence with God. Guru Bhakti – devotion to and faith in the guru – is the first lesson in spiritual sadhana. The relationship between the guru and the shishya is more intimate than even that between the mother and the child. The disciple should have humility and absolute faith in the guru and the guru full of unselfish love and noble concern for the welfare of the disciple. Guru bhakti can work wonders. Guru and God are not to be differentiated in the least. A shastric injunction declares: "If Shiva is angry, guru can protect the devotee, but if the guru is angry, even Shiva cannot protect." The master smoothenes the spiritual path, removes all obstacles and leads the disciple safely to his final destination.

25 Meditation and Samadhi

Meditation is a practical, scientific method of raising the individual consciousness to the transcendental plane, by which the human consciousness can be transmuted to the divine one. Every individual can elevate himself to the plane of divinity by understanding the technique and process of meditation.

To know what meditation really is, we should first know what meditation is not. There are two great misconceptions enjoying wide currency in these days of great spurt in the craze for meditation. The educated moderns are led to believe that meditation is a process of making the mind blank. This can be true only when meditation and sleep are identical, which fortunately is not the truth. Meditation is a process by which we rise above the physical consciousness in full awareness by ending up all identification with the body, mind and senses. The second misconception about meditation, mostly prevalent in the West, is that it is a constant dwelling on various ideas about the object of one's quest, with the mental thrust remaining multi-pronged.

According to the Upanishads, the soul is divine in origin being the Atman itself. But this divinity remains concealed in the jiva by what looks like a number of sheaths or coats: physical (Annamaya Kosa), vital (Pranamaya Kosa), mental (Manomaya Kosa), intellectual (Vijnanamaya Kosa) and the blissful (Anandamaya Kosa). Of these Kosas, the outermost is the grossest, viz., the physical coat and almost all of us spend our lifetime honestly believing that we are this body. But there are rare moments when, while gazing in fascination at an inspired work of art or listening to the sweet and classical music of a gifted singer or standing transfixed at the scenic splendors of nature, we are lifted temporarily above the throttling sense of physical consciousness. Even in those precious moments when we participate in the manifest glory of things, we do not dissociate ourselves from the mind and the intellect. The mystic, on the other hand, sheds his manomaya kosa and vijnanamaya kosa also by total identification with Brahman.

Pranamaya kosa is interior to annamaya kosa. Next comes vijnanamaya kosa and lastly anandamaya kosa, arranged one within the other like the skin of an onion. Each interior sheath is more subtle and pervasive than the exterior. The classic example given is that of ice, water and steam. Water is subtler than ice and steam is subtler than water.

All names and forms are mere superimpositions on Brahman which is Pure Existence. The light of Cosmic Consciousness comes streaming through the complete set of vehicles of sense-organs, mind and intellect, each vehicle removing as it were, some of the constituents and decreasing its intensity until, in the physical body, it is at its dullest and encased in the largest number of *upadhis* (adjuncts) or limitations. The only way, therefore, to see the light of Pure Consciousness, is to eliminate mentally by discrimination, all the apparent shades so that the brilliance of the Self can be intuited in oneself. Through the practice of meditation, when we learn to discard one sheath after another, there will be a gradual expansion of consciousness till at last we stand face to face with Reality.

The stilling of the senses, mind and intellect in dhyana is a process of sanctifying and sublimating the senses and identifying ourselves with the Higher Self. Intense devotion to God and a passionate longing exclusively for Him, also lead one to the realization of the Supreme through meditation. Bhakti is a series of mental efforts at religious realization, beginning with ordinary worship and ending in God-intoxication and total absorption in Samadhi. All the four paths, viz. Karma, Bhakti, Yoga and Jnana, though appearing to come from different directions, cross each other's path in many places and all the paths finally join and proceed in the highway to the Supreme.

In the final experience of *Brahmanubhava*, when one grasps the Reality with insight born of intuition, the ego consciousness is banished altogether, the world is whisked away as if by magic and everything vanishes into the one Ocean of Consciousness, identical with one's own. Time and space, birth and death, all unceasing change disappear. It is beyond the level of relative expression. Past and present fade away and there is just a state of Objectless Awareness. The infinite variety of human feelings are fused, boundaries broken and all ordinary distinctions transcended. There is nothing but the pure Radiance of Beauty and Perfection. The after-hush of this integral experience is that the agitations and tensions of a normal life come to an end and inner peace, indescribable joy and flawless tranquillity reign supreme in their place. Inward joy covers, thereafter, every action with a cosmic significance, for, the whole universe will then be seen only at the level of its Transcendental Essence. Against the sublime splendour and joy of this wonderful experience, all earthly joys are cold and all wealth nothing but dross. This is life's greatest and richest experience bringing fulfillment and completeness to life. The dark pages of human history are illumined only by the lives of such spiritual luminaries. Peace, joy and spontaneous love radiating from an enlightened saint elevate the whole atmosphere to serene and sublime heights.

26 The One And The Many

Brahman in its manifested state is the Supreme Ishwara with His universe. He is also sometimes called *Purushottama*, the Supreme Spirit. With Himself as spirit, He reveals the other side of the One Infinite, viz., Moolaprakriti, the source of matter. Prakriti is matter which takes form, while spirit is Life and Awareness, not lending itself to sense perception. Matter is destructible while spirit is indestructible; matter is *jada* – without consciousness – that which is known, while Self is that which knows.

The nature of Spirit is *Sat, Chit, Ananda* – Being, Consciousness and Bliss. Just as spirit has three qualities, so has matter three qualities – *Sattva, Rajas* and *Tamas* – Rhythm, Motion and Inertia. Inertia gives resistance and stability to matter. Motion keeps matter active and moving about. Rhythm makes movements orderly. The whole universe is built up out of this first pair of opposites – spirit and matter.

The spirit in each one of us is *jiva*. Though it appears as an *amsah* (portion) of Ishwara, it is in essence identical with Brahman.

When Ishwara shines out on Prakriti, the process of manifestation becomes clear and the first forms that appear are *Trimurtis* – the three aspects or faces of Ishwara viz., Brahma as the creative aspect, Vishnu as the sustaining aspect and Shiva as the destructive aspect. The one Brahman appears as three. Brahma is the Creator of all forms of matter (including the human body), Vishnu (means that which pervades) is the vital force that pervades the entire creation and Shiva (means auspiciousness) is He whose function is to dissolve the forms and make them disappear from one plane of existence to another till liberation is attained in due course. Strictly speaking, God did not create the world, but has Himself become the world. Thus the universe is nothing but His own expression. Though the same Reality blushes in the rose, breaks its beauty in the stars and pervades as the sap in the tree, it is seen more fully in human beings than in dead matter, in man than in the beast. Atman is the eternal subject persisting in all the three states of sleep, dream and wakefulness, in birth and death and in *bandha* (bondage) and *mukti* (liberation). In short, It is the Timeless reality of all things in time.

There are some special manifestations of Vishnu, called *avatars* (avatar means one who descends). Though Bhagavata Purana speaks of at least 24 avatars of Vishnu, ten of His avatars are considered as more important than others – Matsya (the fish), Kurma (the tortoise), Varaha (the boar), Narasimha (the man-lion), Vamana (the dwarf), Parashurama (the wielder of the axe), Rama (the Perfect Man), Krishna (the incarnation of Divine Love), Buddha (the Enlightened One) and Kalki (the yet to come avatara). The first three avatars indicate the three great stages of evolution. The development and perfection of the human type is indicated by the others. Unlike Christianity and Islam, Hinduism admits of many avatars in the past and the possibility of many more to come in the future. In fact, Sri Krishna proclaims that whenever Dharma declines and adharma is exalted, He brings Himself forth into manifestation:

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत ।

अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम् ॥७॥

yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānirbhavati bhārata ।

abhyutthānamadharmaṣya tadātmānaṁ sṛjāmy aham ॥7॥ (B. G. iv – 7)

He further affirms it in the next Gita verse:

परित्राणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम् ।

धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय संभवामि युगे युगे ॥८॥

paritrāṇāya sādḥūnāṁ vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām ।

dharmasamsthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge ॥8॥

[For the protection of the good, for destruction of the wicked, for the firm establishment of dharma, I am born in every age.] (B. G. iv – 8)

27 Rituals And Samskaras

To pave the way for the ethical and spiritual refinement and for cleansing the spirit, Hinduism prescribes a number of ceremonies, sacraments, modes of external worship, vows and

pilgrimages. The day to day life of a Hindu, from conception to cremation, is punctuated by a set of sacraments called *samskaras* which are purificatory rites, serving as aids to the culture and refinement of an individual.

These are days when rituals and vows are vehemently denounced by all and sundry, but these jaunty critics forget that a flag-hoisting ceremony, an oath-taking, a protocol or proposing a toast is as much a ritual as ringing the bell in the temple at the time of *arati*. Rites and ceremonies have their use; they have their place, though they have to be transcended for further evolution. They are like those double lines in children's copy book, which guide them to write straight and evenly until they learn to write far better and more gracefully without them. Man is still in the process of evolution and has not yet reached that stage when he can totally dispense with all symbols and rituals and easily comprehend abstract principles. To enable the ordinary men to grasp the subtle spiritual ideals and to make life more happy and colourful, Hinduism prescribes several rituals.

Sandhya at sunrise, noon and sunset, Gayatri Japa, pooja and homa are the important rituals in an individual's life. Almost all of these are still in observance, though with a lesser intensity. The idea behind the performance of rituals is to wean the mind away from worldly moorings and make it God-centered.

Rituals are an expression of the spirit of true devotion and worship. To the Hindu, the true god is not the 'Father in the Heaven' but the *Antaryamin*, the Inner Ruler, the True Self of all and this metaphysical conviction of the immanence of God and of spiritual solidarity of the universe turns every ritual of the Hindus into a form of service to the Lord (*Bhavagad kainkarya roopam*), thus securing for the performer of the rituals *chittasuddhi* (purification of the mind) and divine grace. Rituals cleanse the body and mind of the individual and purify the psychophysical complex by creating an atmosphere of sanctity, reverence and spirituality.

A study of the mantras used in the various rituals connected with the *samskaras* reveals to us the noble thoughts and sublime ideas that are found in them. They embody all good aspirations for the conduct of a disciplined, healthy and happy life.

Gautama, after enumerating forty *samskaras*, mention eight *atmagunas* (qualities of the soul) and makes the significant observation:

"He that has performed the forty *samskaras*, but has not the eight *atmagunas*, enters not into union with Brahman, but he that has performed only a small part of the forty *samskaras* but devotedly cultivates these eight virtues, rises into heaven and merges in Brahman."

(G. D. Su. Viii – 25)

The eight noble qualities are mercy, forbearance, freedom from envy, purity, calmness, right behaviour and freedom from greed and covetousness.

Vyasa prescribes sixteen *samskaras*. The various *samskaras* constitute so many stages for the individual in the process of his socialization. Through them the individual becomes organized and disciplined into a more and more perfect social being. The natural man is raised to the fullest social status, step by step, till marriage when he becomes essentially dedicated to the service of social ends and feels himself more and more at one with the community.

No *samskara* is complete without a *homa*. *Homa* or sacrifice forms a picturesque thanks giving to the gods in return for the gracious favours received from them. Association of *homa* with every *samskara* signifies that life is a perpetual give and take – a long drawn sacrifice.

Some of the important samskaras are *Jatakarma*, *Namakarana*, *Karnavedha*, *Annaprashana*, *Upanayana*, *Vedarambha*, *Samavartana*, *Vivaha* and *Antyeshti*.

All ceremonies performed upon the birth of the child are collectively called *jatakarma*. *Medha janana* (production of intelligence) is the first ceremony. The father gently touches the mouth of the child with a golden spoon dipped in honey and ghee. *Ayusha* – the rite for ensuring longevity for the new born follows next. In *Amsabhimarshana* (touching the child on the shoulders), the father touches the baby with the words:

“Be like a stone, be an axe; be an imperishable piece of gold; thou art Self born as son. Live thus a hundred autumns.” (Parashara Grihya Sutra i. 16 – 14)

Namakarana is the naming ceremony and is performed usually on the tenth or twelfth day after the birth of the child. The child is given normally a name that kindles religious sentiments when uttered.

Karnavedha solemnizes the piercing of the ear lobes of the child. According to Sushruta, the celebrated physician of yore, this prevents hydrocele and hernia.

Annaprashana – the first feeding of the child with solid food is performed when the child is six months old.

Upanayana: This samskara is called *upanayana* because the boy, at the time of performance of this ceremony, is taken (*nayana*) near (*upa*) the teacher for initiation into spiritual and mundane studies. The Gayatri Mantra, taught to him at this time, marks the beginning of a rigorous intellectual discipline.

On the morning of *upanayana*, the boy takes his meal with his mother. In ancient days, this was his last joint meal with his mother, for, soon he was to go to the house of his guru. The mother used to sit the boy on her lap and feed him with her own hands. Eight of his play mates too were invited for this meal. It was a solemn occasion for these boys too, because their friend was shortly to depart for the gurukula and was to be away from them for some years. This ceremony is called *Ashtavarga*. *Kaupina* (receiving the loin cloth), *Mekhala* (girdle), *Yajnopavita* (investiture with the sacred thread), *Danda* (receiving the staff), initiation into the *Savitri Mantra* (Gayatri) and *bhiksha* (going round for alms) are the other important aspects. *Kaupina* is an act of initiation of the boy into social decency and decorum and symbolises the beginning of a life of self control. *Mekhala* – the triple cord wound round the boy’s waist – is a symbol of self restraint, as the boy is to keep all his desires and aversions within bounds. *Yajnopavita* and *danda* suggest that from now on his life is to be one of continuous self sacrifice. The staff (*danda*) conveys the moral that the student should put down firmly the six hidden enemies within him, viz., lust, anger, greed, delusion, infatuation and envy and banish them from his mind. Going round for *bhiksha* inculcates humility and a sense of indebtedness to society whose debts he has to discharge. From this time on, as a student, he wears an austere outfit.

Vedarambha marks the beginning of Vedic study.

Samavartana means “returning home from the gurukula” after completing studies. Before departure from the gurukula, the teacher delivers a sublime and soul stirring sermon, reminiscent of the modern convocational address. Here is a sample from the Taittiriya Upanishad:

सत्यं वद । धर्मं चर । स्वाध्यायान्मा प्रमदः

मातृदेवो भव । पितृदेवो भव । आचार्यदेवो भव । अतिथिदेवो भव ॥

यान्यनवद्यानि कर्माणि । तानि सेवितव्यानि । नो इतराणि ।

यान्यस्माकं सुचरितानि । तानि त्वयोपास्यानि । नो इतराणि ॥

श्रद्धया देयम् । अश्रद्धया न देयम् । श्रिया देयम् ।

हिया देयम् । भिया देयम् । संविदा देयम् ॥

satyaṁ vada | dharmaṁ cara | svādhyāyānmā pramadaḥ

mātr̥devo bhava | pit̥r̥devo bhava | ācāryadevo bhava | atithidevo bhava ||

yānyanavadyāni karmāṇi | tāni sevityāni | no itarāṇi |

yānyasmākaṁ sucaritāni | tāni tvayopāsyāni | no itarāṇi ||

śraddhayā deyam | aśraddhayā na deyam | śriyā deyam |

hriyā deyam | bhiyā deyam | saṁvidā deyam ||

[Speak the Truth. Practise Dharma. Swerve not from the study of the scriptures ... Let thy mother be to thee a God; let thy father be to thee a God; a God let thy teacher be unto thee and let thy guest also be unto thee a God. Let only those works be done by thee that are free from blemishes, and not others. Only those deeds of ours should be followed by thee, that are good and not others Gift should be given with faith; it should never be given without faith; it should be given in plenty, with modesty, with fear, with compassion.]

Vivaha: For the Hindu, marriage is a *samskara*, a purificatory act – and as such the relations between the man and the woman entering into wedlock, are of a sacramental character, and not of a contractual nature. When a woman becomes a wife, she is designated as the husband's *dharmapatni* or *sahadharmacharini*, i.e., she who has to share all the sacred obligations or she who fulfils her sacred obligations in partnership with her husband. Consequently a Hindu marriage is considered to be too sacred to be dissolved. The *smritis* highly extol *Grihasthashrama* as the best one and regard it as the prime prop and pillar of the whole social structure. Marriage is a means of elevating the earthly life to a spiritual plane and not a social licence for indulgence in sense pleasures. It is a concession to the worldly man for taming his passions and conquering his lower self so that the highest pursuit of life can be easily attained.

Among the various ceremonies connected with marriage, the important ones are: *Kanyadana* (the gift of the bride to the bridegroom), *Homa* (offerings in sacred fire), *Panigrahana* (clasping the bride's hand), *Ashmarohana* (mounting the stone), *Saptapadi* (taking seven steps together) and *Dhruva Arundhati Darshana* (pointing out the pole star and / or Arundhati Nakshatra.) *Panigrahana* symbolizes the husband's assumption of full responsibility for his wife. *Ashmarohana* is a *samskara* performed for attainment of firmness, of strength of character and will. *Saptapadi* is the most important rite in *vivaha*. While taking the seven steps together, the bride and bridegroom recite relevant mantras praying for vitality and stability in life, prosperity, progeny and happiness. *Dhruva darshana* symbolizes the quality of firmness (*dhruvatva*) while *Arundhati* symbolizes co-operation (*arundhati* – non-interrupting) and coveted virtues in the bride.

Antyeshthi represents the rites that are performed upon the death of an individual for the deceased soul's continued good and spiritual felicity.

It is customary to pour a few drops of Ganges water and put a *tulasi* (basil) leaf into the mouth of the dying person. The dead body is washed with water, a tilaka is put on the forehead, and the body is covered with an unbleached cloth with the mantra:

“Give up the clothes thou hast worn”

It is then decked with flowers and fragrant unguents. The body is then placed on a bier and carried to the cremation ground accompanied by chanting the names of the Lord loudly. This chanting is a humble attempt on the part of the mourners to induce the departed one to remember the Lord rather than be still weighed down by his earthly anxieties. The funeral pyre is lit with suitable mantras which suggest that cremation is conceived as a sacrifice and that the cremated one, a gift to the Gods. The ashes and bones are later on collected and consigned into holy rivers. If buried, a mound is raised over the remains. *Shraddha* (offerings made to the dead) forms an important part of the last rites.

To sum up, the soul flies into the womb of the mother thrilled by the parental chant of prayers and flows out of its earthly body once again amidst the chant of mantras. What a grand view of life and death inspires the Hindus! In between these poles of birth and death, life turns out to be a continuous quest for Truth – a search for holiness. The samskaras for all Hindus start well before birth and continue after death, strengthening their conviction that the soul invites on itself, time and again, a series of births and deaths, till salvation is attained.

28 Festivals And Temples

India is a land of temples and festivals. Festivals connected with certain sacred days, temples, rivers and pilgrim centres, form a vital part of the social and religious fabric of India. Apart from serving as special occasions for expressing and developing religious sentiments and pious emotion, they help the people to forget their hardships and sufferings, worries and anxieties and make themselves merry. They foster the arts, develop the culture, bring about communal integration and weld the society into one composite unit. The meeting of like minded people affords an opportunity for the participants to exchange views and strengthen their religious faith and devotion to God. On these occasions, there is fun and mirth, a welcome relief from the monotony of life and agitation and a strengthening of one's spiritual personality.

Every festival day reminds one of the glories of God, the perpetual play of His Divine Power in cosmic manifestation and of the need for leading a life based on ever enduring spiritual verities. As the *Vaideekamata* offers innumerable festivals in a year, there is an unbroken stream of spiritual thoughts and ideas in the minds of its followers. The dramas and plays staged during the festivals inculcate in the minds of the masses high morals and uplifting spiritual ideas.

On these festive occasions, there is a general cleaning up, resulting in a many sided hygienic activity. The houses are newly plastered, white washed and everything in and around the houses and temples is kept neat, clean and sanctified.

In a temple festival, in the presence of the Lord, all distinctions and differences between individuals, rich and poor, totally disappear, giving rise to feelings of spiritual unity and social harmony.

Even in the tiniest and remotest village in India, there will at least be one temple which is the public place of worship. No private residence can compare, in excellence and architectural

perfection, with an abode of god. Going to the temple is, however, not obligatory for a Hindu. A Hindu may be very religious but yet may not have visited a temple for years and years. Still a temple is a necessity for society, since the sight of a temple arouses in the ordinary forgetful man feelings of God and helps him to keep up his awareness at all times. To a Hindu, the body is the real temple of God and while praying his eyes never look up to the clouds or the heaven, but are indrawn and closed as to get an intuitive awareness of the immanence of God in his own little self. The temple themselves are constructed on the plan of the human body. Every temple has as its entrance an imposing tower symbolizing the noble aspiration of the human soul to leap from the finite to the Infinite. The central place in the temple, where the idol is installed, is called the *Garba Griha* – the sanctum sanctorum – symbolizing the heart-centre where God takes His seat. The architectural excellence, the fascinating beauty of the idols and the massive wonderful structure of the Hindu temples are marvels of art, even according to modern standards.

29 Teachings

Sanatana Dharma teaches that:

1. There is one Infinite, Eternal, Changeless Existence, the All, from which everything has come out, by which everything is sustained and to which everything returns. That is Brahman. That must be known.
2. God is one, but His aspects are many.
3. God is the Atman, the Self, the Immortal, the Inner Ruler, the Unchanging Witness, dwelling in all objects and beings. He pervades everything. The spark of divinity burns in everybody's heart with a glowing like a gem.
4. The purpose of human life is to realize God in one's own self and in everything. To be immortal is to live in that Light of Divinity. Numerous are the paths that lead to Him.
5. Man survives death, there is reincarnation. The jiva, the psychic person, changes and grows from life to life, in newer bodies till perfection is reached and freedom gained. Death is just a change of state.
6. No pleasure abides in the trivial; the Self alone is the real seat of joy. Pursue not fancy's path; pain proceeds from folly.
7. Turn away from the path of evil, for, the bad effects visit one with a tragic promptness.
8. Sacrifice is the law of evolution. Jnana is the solvent of all harrowing ills, suffering and bondage.
9. Be good, be pure, be compassionate. For all is Self in deep disguise, yourself in another form.
10. Neither by rituals, nor by progeny, nor by riches, but by renunciation alone can Immortality be attained. Salvation is attainable in this very life.

30 Conclusion

During its march through millennia, Hinduism has withstood the ravages of time and conquered all alien movements – religious, cultural and otherwise – that came very near crushing it. It has passed through many vicissitudes of history facing cultural onslaughts and ideological offensives and has emerged stronger and stronger after every challenge that was thrown before it. It strengthened itself by a process of conservative liberalism, by doggedly clinging to the tested age-old traditional faith, simultaneously gathering to its bosom the good features and noble principles of the new cults and creeds. Standing on the bed rock of eternal values, it has kept in check all attacks against it by renewing itself from time to time. The strength of Sanatana Dharma lies in its persistent vitality.

When the history of Sanatana Dharma is read, another feature that strikes us as most important is its catholicity and total absence of dogmatism, bigotry and narrow mindedness. The Hindu religion and philosophy are absolutely universal. Sanatana Dharma gives the widest freedom and greatest accommodation in matters of faith and worship. It has never tried to preach a single exclusive system of salvation for all, knowing fully well that to do so would be nothing but immaturity and stupidity in their essence. ‘As many individuals, so many minds; as many minds, so many faiths’ is a cardinal tenet of Hinduism. Sri Krishna asserts that in whatever way people worship Him, in the same way does He fulfill their desires and that all paths lead to Him.

Two unique contributions of Hinduism to religion in general are *adhikara* (eligibility) and *Ishta* (ideal). The greatness of the Vedic religion lies in its capacity to fulfill the needs of each and every individual according to his temperaments and mood and prescribe a way for his salvation, most appropriate at his stage of spiritual development. Its contribution to world culture and philosophical thought has been great in the past and its role in building up a better order of society and peace and good will among nations will be no less pivotal in the future. Right from the dim dawn of history, it has been the fairest flower in the Garden of Philosophy and its enchanting beauty and sweet fragrance will hold sway over the posterity for ever and ever.

यो रुद्रो अग्नौ यो अप्सु य ओषधीषु यो रुद्रो विश्वा

भुवनाऽऽविवेश तस्मै रुद्राय नमो अस्तु ॥

yo rudro agnou yo apsu ya oṣadhīṣu yo rudro viśvā

bhuvanā"āviveśa tasmai rudrāya namo astu ॥

[Obeisance to the Lord who is in fire, who is in water, who is in the plants and creepers and who pervades the universe and the entire creation!]

ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः

om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ

LET US MARCH FROM BONDAGE IN TIME TO FREEDOM IN ETERNITY!